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## Problems of implementation

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### SUMMARY

The paper examines a number of empirical studies which investigate the implementation problems that have been experienced in Third World countries. Most of these studies are evaluation studies, specifically undertaken in order to identify the type and frequency with which implementation problems were being experienced. Only one of the studies is country-specific (Indonesia), drawing its data directly from the problem-reporting component of the national monitoring system, although encompassing a sufficiently large number of projects for some general conclusions to be drawn. The paper finds that about half of the implementation difficulties experienced in Third World projects or programmes arise through the procedures and operating methods of central ministries other than the implementing ministry. The key ministries are principally planning, finance and personnel. Concentration by Third World governments on strengthening the central procedures under which all projects operate, therefore, is likely to have a disproportionately high impact on the implementation of development programmes. Suggestions for obtaining this improvement conclude the paper.

### INTRODUCTION

Effective policies—in agricultural incentives, in industrial promotion, in human resource development, etc.—are among the means by which Third World countries can improve their economic and social well-being. But a significant component of the development efforts of Third World countries is also in the individual projects that are instituted through the operating ministries of a government. These projects are in health, education, industry, agriculture and in many other sectors of the economy. It is with the planning and the implementation of these projects, and the difficulties that are experienced, that this paper is primarily concerned.

The paper examines the problems that arise in the implementation of these projects, and in the implementation of associated policy decisions. The paper uses the results of the analyses of the problems that occur on a large number of Third World projects and programmes, in order to isolate the underlying administrative patterns that cause difficulties in the implementation phases.<sup>1</sup> It then examines some of the steps which are open to governments to overcome these problems.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'project' and 'programme' are used interchangeably in this paper. Provided a programme has reasonably discrete objectives, and a time frame, its achievements can be assessed.

Empirical evidence that indicates where implementation problems on projects are occurring is drawn from four sources:

- (1) data obtained from the problem-reporting component of a nationwide monitoring system that is operating in Indonesia, a country which probably has the most extensive problem-reporting component of any central monitoring system;
- (2) an extensive study of the literature on implementation, in order to identify the type, location and frequency of implementation problems;
- (3) a 1983 study of the experience of the UK bilateral aid agency in implementing poverty-related projects; and
- (4) a published study which draws on three international aid agencies to identify implementation problems and where they occur.

With the possible exception of the literature search, none of the sources are sufficiently general to develop findings with widespread applicability and reliability. Cumulatively, however, they do indicate that tentative conclusions can be drawn about implementation problems in the Third World.

### **EXPERIENCE IN INDONESIA**

The central planning agency of the Government of Indonesia established a project-monitoring system in the early 1970s. This system enables project managers to report problems that are experienced on their projects and to inform, via the central planning agency, their own ministry and other ministries or agencies which are contributors to their project. The processing of the reported data is fully computerized, with a list of problems that has approximately 170 coded items. In addition to reporting cost and physical progress against target, the project manager selects and reports from this coded list the difficulties that he is experiencing in implementing the project.

Table 1 shows the frequency of problems that were reported in 1979. The table summarizes the results of problems reported by project managers on approximately 2000 projects, in each of the four quarters of the year. The table is a direct translation of the computer printout that summarizes results for each quarter of the year.

The printout, which lists only those problems which were reported in one quarter and which had not been resolved by the following quarter, shows the total number of unresolved problems reported over the year at four and a half thousand. As Table 1 shows, approximately 25 problems account for virtually all issues which were difficult to resolve.

Interpretation of the figures in Table 1 should be made with some caution, as their source is a report from the project manager in charge of implementation. This manager would, where responsibility is not clear, tend to identify a third party as the cause of implementation difficulties, rather than himself or his ministry. Nevertheless, the table indicates that the most frequently recurring problems lie in the structure and systems of the government's central administration. The most frequent problem is delay in project approval (which, in Indonesia, was then required prior to incurring expenditure in any fiscal year). None of the five most

Table 1. Difficult implementation problems experienced in Indonesia, calendar year 1979

Problem classification	Number reported	Percentage of total	Rank
DIP (Project approval)	728	16.0	1
Government regulations	717	15.8	2
Approval of plans and of methods of implementation	445	9.8	3
Land acquisition (Ministry of Home Affairs)	304	6.7	4
Contractors	279	6.1	5
Processing of agreements and documents	243	5.3	6
Personnel	223	4.9	7
Equipment and machinery	224	4.9	8
SKO (Ministry of Finance authorization for funds)	225	4.9	9
Materials for project	217	4.8	10
Natural causes	196	4.3	11
Other causes	177	3.9	12
Infrastructure	177	2.6	13
Co-ordination with and among government departments and institutions	88	1.9	14
Consultants/technical assistance	74	1.6	15
Project buildings	69	1.5	16
SPM (Special request for purchase of materials)	61	1.3	17
SPJ (Verification of expenditures of funds against releases)	50	1.1	18
SPP (quarterly request for release of funds)	39	0.9	19
Foreign aid commitments	19	0.4	21
Credit (for project target group)	17	0.4	20
Damage by crop pests	13	0.3	22
Slower than planned achievement of project components	10	0.2	23
Release of foreign funds	10	0.2	24
Letter of credit	4	0.1	25
Total	4549	99.9%	

frequently reported problems, and very few of the total of the 25 problems, can be directly attributed to the implementing agency.

In practice, of course, an outside agency other than the main implementing agency may be late with its contribution to the project. Alternatively the quality of its work may militate against an effective achievement of project objectives. Such problems may not be the fault of that contributing agency, but could have arisen through poor specifications or scheduling by the implementing agency, or through inadequate follow-up and co-ordination by the project manager. The monitoring system report does not identify the agency which is responsible in such cases, i.e. it does not state whether mutually agreed schedules and performance standards were developed prior to the start of implementation. Nevertheless, even allowing that more than one agency can be the cause behind an implementation problem, Table 1 provides a strong indication that the majority of difficulties arise in the procedures of agencies other than the implementing agencies.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON IMPLEMENTATION

The Bibliography lists some 30 articles or books which have examined the planning and implementation of projects in the field, and which mention difficulties that have

been experienced in particular regions, or on specific types of projects.<sup>2</sup> The diversity of emphases which have been placed by the various authors on the different types of projects, or on various aspects of the implementation process, would suggest that the studies would give more weight to some types of problems than to others. The problems that occur on agricultural development projects in Africa, for instance, would likely be different to the problems that occur on infrastructure implementation in Latin America. Nevertheless, a summation across this literature of the problems of implementation does give an approximate indication of the frequency and seriousness of the issues.

The literature identified many problems, sometimes in great detail and sometimes in a considerable degree of generality. The more general identifications were used in summarizing the literature, so that the frequency of mention of as many of the problems as possible could be recorded and ranked. The use of the more general headings has meant that the problems listed would not always appear to be mutually exclusive. In practice, however, little difficulty was experienced in assigning problems to one of the headings.<sup>3</sup> Altogether some 52 problems were identified, together with the frequency with which they are mentioned.<sup>4</sup> The 52 problems were mentioned, in aggregate, on 272 occasions. The eight most frequently mentioned problems, in rank order, were:

- (1) Involvement/motivation of the target group (a frequency of mention which may only reflect the preponderance of articles on agricultural development in the sample).
- (2) Necessity for institutional or legal change.
- (3) Co-ordination and co-operation between contributors.
- (4) Systems for on-site managing of the project or programme.
- (5) Political will, or political consensus necessary for the support of the programme.
- (6) Monitoring and evaluation leading to re-evaluation and redesign of the project or programme.
- (7) Knowledge and attitudes of target group.
- (8) Availability of local currency funds.

These eight problems account for about 35 per cent of all the implementation problems that were mentioned in the literature. This listing, as does the original counting of the 52 problems, attributes slightly more implementation difficulties to the project manager than did the monitoring reports from Indonesia. Although the literature does not always clearly identify the institutional location of the problem,

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<sup>2</sup> The sources used are listed in the bibliography. A small number of reviews of implementation issues in developed countries were included in the original study, in order to determine if significant differences could be isolated. The list is not exhaustive, but does cover most of the significant publications on implementation over a 10-year period. It draws on a sufficiently wide cross-section of countries and project types to provide a reliable indicator of implementation issues.

<sup>3</sup> The choice of the title for a problem description was dictated by the requirement to maximize the number of distinctive titles, modified by the need to capture general problems which could not be classified if the titles were too distinct. The context in which the problem was mentioned in the paper did provide an additional and reliable means of classification against the content of each title description.

<sup>4</sup> The worksheets for this analysis, which identify the location or administrative cause of each of the problems, are not provided in this paper. Those interested can obtain a copy from the author.

nevertheless the analysis indicates that possibly only 20 per cent of implementation problems lie with the project manager's office. Just over 50 per cent lie with other implementing units, outside the direct jurisdiction of either the project manager or his parent agency.

### **OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION STUDY**

The British aid agency examination of experience with the United Kingdom aid programme on implementing poverty-related projects in Africa and Asia also provides information on the causes behind implementation difficulties (Morris and Dwyer, 1983). In examining the implementation of integrated rural development projects in Africa, for instance, the study identified twelve major problems. These were:

- (1) Inhospitable economic situation.
- (2) Insufficient knowledge of present crop system.
- (3) Further testing of new crop systems was usually required on the farms in the area. In the early stages of the project, therefore, the extension service did not possess sufficiently firm production proposals.
- (4) Over-optimistic adoption and yield assumptions. This problem, as with the above two problems, arises from the inadequacy of investigations into current cropping patterns, and the amount of research and testing on the suitability and likely adoption rates of proposed cropping patterns. Assumed adoption rates were, therefore, usually too high.
- (5) Valuation of increased farm labour—the added labour costs to the farmer were generally not taken into account in assessing the viability of proposed farm use.
- (6) Project proposals insufficiently financially attractive to farmers. When adjustments for above-optimistic assumptions were made it was found that the returns to the farmer were often inadequate—in one case even negative.
- (7) Marketing and pricing policies—often due to fixed pricing schemes or inefficient marketing by central authorities.
- (8) Increased size of extension staff was often not warranted.
- (9) Management of complex multi-sector projects—difficulties that arose primarily due to the introduction of non-agricultural components into the project.
- (10) Project management too divorced from existing institutions, frequently through the establishment of a separate project management entity.
- (11) Sociological constraints—principally problems that arose from inability or unwillingness to communicate with local people.
- (12) Insufficient feedback to project management from monitoring.

It can be seen that some of these issues arise from the day-to-day management of the project, possibly to a greater extent than earlier studies. A large number of them, however, arise from the planning of the programme itself, where if an institutional responsibility is to be assigned, it would be the parent ministry or possibly a central

planning agency. Some issues, such as the inhospitable economic climate, lie largely outside the scope of a national administration.

Nevertheless, a number of the problems lie in national policies—in marketing and pricing policies, in the institutional arrangements for managing and staffing the project, in appropriations for agricultural research, and in approaches to involving local people in planning considerations. Although the conclusion can be drawn from this study that a larger number of the problems arose from within the implementing ministry than did in the earlier studies, the conclusion is also obvious that the policies of the central government are not blameless; and that the project management itself is responsible only for a few of the difficulties.

In summing up the experience in Africa together with that from several projects in Asia, the authors developed a number of proposals which are designed to improve effectiveness in agricultural smallholder projects. These proposals include strengthened policies on research, strengthened financial analysis and planning of projects, a more widespread adoption of pilot projects, a strengthened institutional base and strengthened monitoring and evaluation of projects.

### AID AGENCY STUDY

This study, carried out in 1974 and 1975, documented the results of interviews with officials in three large international assistance agencies ([Rondinelli, 1976](#)). It also drew on an analysis of selected internal evaluation documents. The study identified 67 problems in project implementation under seven main headings:

- (1) Ineffective project planning and preparation.
- (2) Faulty appraisal and selection processes.
- (3) Defective project design.
- (4) Problems in start-up and activation.
- (5) Inadequate project execution, operation and supervision.
- (6) Inadequate or ineffective external co-ordination of project activities.
- (7) Deficiencies in diffusion and evaluation of project results and follow-up action.

The study did not attempt to identify the location of each of the 67 problems, or their frequency of occurrence. The author's assignment of the possible administrative locations of the cause (which included multiple locations for some problems) revealed that about a quarter of the problems could possibly be assigned to the project manager.<sup>5</sup> A higher proportion (over half) could be assigned to the implementing agency. Although many of the assignments of problem locations are based on experience and reasoning rather than direct observation, it would appear that a significant number of the problems could be attributed to units outside either the project management structure or its parent ministry. Most of them are planning-related, concerned with staffing or funding, or with national policies and practices that affect all ministries in a similar fashion.

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<sup>5</sup> Again, the problems that were identified, their frequency and possible institutional locations are not shown in this paper. They are available separately, if required.

The study, incidentally, revealed a much higher percentage of problems that were attributed to the international assistance agencies than did the Indonesian results. This finding is possibly only a reflection of the source of data used for the study. Other than the assistance agencies, the analysis also indicates that common locations of implementation problems were in the national planning agency and the ministry of finance.

### **CONSISTENCY OF FINDINGS WITH THE PROCESS OF PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING A PROJECT**

The above studies provide approximate indications of possible locations and causes of implementation problems. Each, of course, may only reflect the interests, and possibly the biases, of the observers, but at least two of the sources draw on multiple observers, which would tend to reduce bias. It is possible, therefore, to isolate and tentatively draw some common conclusions. The most significant, of course, is that although the results vary the studies provide a strong indication that close to half of the implementation problems are seen to lie outside the province of the project manager or his parent agency.

This result is consistent with the roles of different contributors in the planning and implementation of a project. A brief examination of these roles is set out in the following paragraphs. The planning phase is included in this examination of implementation problems, for it is in that phase that many decisions are made that will determine the extent to which the project will be successfully implemented. Planning includes not only the design and scheduling for implementation, but the earlier stages of feasibility study and appraisal. In these earlier phases, decisions or assumptions are made on matters such as technical methods, costs, availability of skilled manpower, location, pricing and marketing policies, participation by the recipient population, etc. These assumptions may be wrong, or may not eventuate once the project is being implemented. Many of these decisions will be made by the planning units of the implementing ministry, but a number of them will also rely on the central planning agency, or reflect the current policies of the central government, applicable to all projects.

In planning for the implementation of a project, schedules and budgets are established for all participants, together with appropriate control systems. Agreements on quality and type of work to be produced are made, funding demands on the central treasury are planned, and materials schedules arranged and preliminary orders placed on domestic or international sources. Any of these agreements or schedules, if loosely or inadequately developed, will end up as a problem for the implementation manager.

Even the overall rate of implementation, if optimistically scheduled, will result in a project where the 'delays' appear to be the fault of the project manager, but where the blame, if it is to be apportioned, would be elsewhere.

During implementation the manager will need to rely on other parties, often outside his own parent agency or ministry. An examination of the more significant of the inputs to a project shows that the majority are outside a project manager's control, and are subject to systems of management and administration over which he has no influence. Policies or practices on manpower development, research, the



allocation of domestic and foreign funds, the purchasing procedures for materials, the provision of staff, and on pricing or tariffs on many inputs, are national in character. The incorporation of these national policies into a programme's planning will determine the rate, means and effectiveness of implementation.

Most of these policies or practices of the government are outside the influence of project managers. It is a rare project on which the project manager has complete control of all inputs, including staff, required on the project. Reliance usually has to be placed on his own ministry, and on a number of contractors and co-operating agencies, including the large and powerful ministries of the central government. The success with which these contributors can be co-ordinated can only in part depend on the methods of project planning, scheduling and management follow-up that are used. In most cases the achievements of contributors will depend on the adequacy of their own internal management systems, and the priorities which they give to the projects to which they are contributing.

Even questions of the participation by the intended beneficiaries in the implementation of a project—a factor which appears to be crucial to the success of poverty-oriented projects—is often outside the control of the on-site manager. If national policies, or even the planning practices of his own agency, do not encourage such participation, then it is unlikely that a particular site manager will make any significant effort to involve local people in the project. In many cases the appointment as project manager often commences only with the implementation phase, long after initial planning, and the possibility of local involvement, has been completed.<sup>6</sup>

In short, a sound argument exists, supported by the studies on the causes of implementation problems, that a major portion of the difficulties experienced in implementation are outside the control of the project manager, or an implementing ministry. As a result, the advantages of strengthening the systems of central government which impinge on the planning and implementation process become apparent.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE IMPROVEMENT**

There are several approaches to improving the central administration's capability to manage more effectively the issues raised in this paper. Most countries would have at least one management training centre, to which they endeavour to send public sector managers who have, or are likely to have, responsibility for managing projects and programmes. Many of these training courses go beyond basic management training, and delve into the complex administrative and co-ordinating systems required of a modern government. Many of the training institutions, however, do not concentrate on the issues and problems faced by operating agencies; nor do they examine in any critical depth the planning, funding and implementation policies of the central government. The reasons are twofold: (1) training is an activity which does not usually have a remit to examine the policies of

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<sup>6</sup> A recent study by S. W. Edmunds (1984) forms the conclusion that decentralization and commitment are the two major needs in implementation. This study draws on a survey of development projects, and a literature review. Its findings have not been used in this paper, however, as a different categorization structure has been used and, in some cases, the problems encountered appear more extensive than questions of participation and commitment.

major central ministries; and (2) even if it did, the training institutions do not often have the staff, in skills or numbers, to examine complex issues of administrative co-ordination and to translate this examination into an effective training activity.

Another approach to improving the central management of development projects is the use of an internal management review or consulting group, often located within the civil service personnel agency or in a central secretariat. This group is usually charged with resolving issues of an administration-wide nature, and would be an ideal unit to help resolve some of the concerns identified in this paper.

The groups, however, vary widely in capability and status. It is unlikely that a management services, or an organization and methods group in most civil services in the LDCs will be given the authority to examine some of the problems arising in a powerful central ministry. The funds allocation system within a Ministry of Finance has frequently been noted as causing widespread implementation problems. This problem is unlikely to be given to an O&M group in the Civil Service Commission for resolution, or possibly even the management services unit in the Ministry.

Such central management services groups may be supplemented by management improvement units in the line ministries. In addition, for complex or wide-ranging issues, countries frequently have recourse to special committees of enquiry, drawn from inside and outside the civil service, with sufficient status to provide a wide coverage of the issues and eventual acceptance of the final recommendations. Some of the project problems that are national in character, experienced by a large number of projects, are only likely to be resolved by a high-level, multi-member task force of this type, one whose terms of reference permit it to oversee any continuing corrective efforts.

Mention should also be made of central systems of monitoring and evaluation that have been established in many Third World countries in recent years. These systems report performance data and difficulties experienced with the project to the implementing ministry and the central administration (Bowden, 1980). Although some of the systems are embryonic, and all of them differ to some extent in their methods of operation, they do have the ability to help resolve a number of the issues that have been discussed in this paper. Briefly, these are through:

- (1) The establishment of a monitoring and problem-identification system which establishes difficulties experienced during implementation on major projects in the country. Separate analysis or investigation of the causes behind the problems enables the unit operating the system to bring this information to the attention of ministries with the influence or the responsibility to take corrective action.
- (2) An identification of the frequency, and a ranking of the priority of difficulties being experienced, which enables the unit to raise the level of administrative and political awareness of planning and implementation problems that are occurring nationally. By acting jointly with the implementing ministries and projects the unit is seen as a source of assistance on issues which are outside the control of the implementing agencies. This assistance could extend to resolving difficulties arising from poor inter-organizational co-ordination. The unit's efforts, however, would be curative, rather than preventive, rarely extending to prior intervention for this, or any other type of problem.

- (3) Locating the central monitoring and evaluation unit in a strong central ministry, with top-level political support. Such support brings benefits to the unit in terms of access to the projects, or in obtaining an endorsement for proposed changes in current practices or policies. The method chosen for analysis and implementation of change can be direct action by the central unit, or any of the methods mentioned earlier—use of a management services unit, training, or a high-level task force.

Such monitoring and evaluation systems do not centralize bureaucracies unnecessarily. When acting in support of a project manager they are a form of decentralization. But their potential lies in the ability to counter the issues raised in this paper. If many of the problems of planning and implementation lie outside the influence of the implementing agency, and instead with key central ministries, then a nationwide system of identifying and resolving the problems is necessary.

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